

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 HARARE 000186

SIPDIS

SIPDIS

AF/S FOR B. NEULING
NSC FOR SENIOR AFRICA DIRECTOR C. COURVILLE
STATE PASS TO USAID FOR M. COPSON AND E. LOKEN
TREASURY FOR J. RALYEA AND B. CUSHMAN
COMMERCE FOR BECKY ERKUL

E.O. 12958: DECL: 01/12/2016

TAGS: PGOV PREL ECON ZI

SUBJECT: LAURIE ON POLITBURO SHIFT ON WEST

REF: HARARE 165

Classified By: Ambassador Christopher Dell under Section 1.4 b/d

Summary

11. (C) John Laurie, a former leading post-independence businessman and parliamentarian who maintains regular contact with a Politburo member and has a personal relationship with Mugabe, relayed to Econoff on February 8 that the Politburo recognized the accelerating pace of economic deterioration and conceded it was time for rapprochement with the West. He maintained that Mugabe felt politically secure but wanted to exit with a measure of pride. Laurie appealed to the USG to take advantage of Mugabe's posture and Zimbabwe's economic weakness and work with GOZ moderates on re-engagement. End Summary

Politburo Shift

12. (C) Laurie described his recent encounters with a member of the Politburo, with whom he maintains regular contact (and whom we assume to be Kantibai Patel based on references to his Indian ethnicity), and with President Mugabe. The ZANU-PF official told Laurie that Politburo consensus was that accelerating economic decline left no alternative to negotiations with the West. The Politburo wanted the Minister of Foreign Affairs to conduct high-level meetings in Washington. Failing that, negotiations would have to occur at the ambassadorial level. In Laurie's words, there was a feeling of "semi-desperation" in Politburo circles. Laurie inquired if Ambassador Dell was open to negotiations. Econoff replied that any improvement in bilateral relations would hinge on the GOZ's willingness to recognize that comprehensive political and economic reforms would have to be a condition of dialogue.

Insight into Mugabe

13. (C) As a confidant of the late First Lady Sally Mugabe, Laurie takes part in commemorative services at Heroes' Acre on the January 27 anniversary of her death. This year he was one of about 20 guests (half of them Roman Catholic nuns) to accompany Mugabe to State House after the commemoration. He said that, contrary to some press reports, Mugabe did not break down at the gravesite, but, as has been the case every year, he appeared deeply moved on the occasion. Sitting to Mugabe's immediate right at State House, Laurie commented that Mugabe had aged considerably since they last spoke about eight months ago, and appeared "more stressed than ever." Bidding farewell after a two-hour breakfast during which Mugabe was frequently interrupted by aides, Laurie said he would like to have a meeting him; Mugabe welcomed the suggestion and told him to contact his personal secretary.

14. (C) Laurie appealed for the U.S. to "feed the moderates" who either had no power base or "not enough gumption" to push for change. He commended the content and timing of Ambassador Dell's November speech in Mutare, but advised that the time was not right for further such speeches; it was the time to be publicly quiet but active behind the scenes.

15. (C) Laurie felt that Mugabe was more prepared now than he had been for a very long time to engage with the West and negotiate economic help, as he had crushed the opposition, land reform was a done deal, and Mugabe knew that Zimbabweans were cowed by his capacity to lash back in an instant against revolt. He said that Mugabe was a fighter who "enjoyed a scrap," but who wanted to go out with his head held high. He added that Mugabe was not prone to make quick moves, but that this was the time when he could afford politically to reach out to the West. In Laurie's opinion, the biggest squeeze on the economy - and opportunity for outside leverage - was

approaching in the next months when disappointing results of the current growing season will flow in and South Africa could begin to reduce power supplies to Zimbabwe.

Bio Notes

16. (U) Laurie has said that he worked very closely with Sally Mugabe in her Child Survival and Development Foundation, and that he is a trustee of the Foundation. He was honored to be the only white person invited to speak at her funeral. Laurie was President of the Commercial Farmers' Union (CFU) from 1983-1986, Parliamentary Senator from 1986-1990, Chairman of the Beira Corridor Group from 1990-1998, Chairman of the National Railways of Zimbabwe from 1995-1997. He was a participant in the International Visitor program in 1987. He is a member of the Board of Directors of Standard Chartered Bank, along with other Boards of several major Zimbabwean companies. He also heads up the Committee for Compensation, which is active in securing professional valuations of seized commercial farms and keeping alive the farmers' compensation claims.

17. (C) He appears to be at odds with the present leadership of the CFU over who has the authority to represent dispossessed commercial farmers in compensation discussions with the GOZ. He has criticized CFU leadership privately for its lack of attention to the plight of dispossessed farmers and for its narrow focus on keeping commercial farms under production, firstly in Zimbabwe and, failing that, in closely neighboring countries.

18. (C) Laurie had a small but intensely worked commercial farm of tobacco, maize, cattle and roses for export that was seized by a woman whom he alleges is the mistress of Governor Chigudu of Manicaland and a high-level municipal government official in Mutare. Recent satellite photos show the farm out of production and the greenhouses destroyed, according to Laurie. The new owner has abandoned the site and moved to her third seized farm in the Vumba valley in the Eastern Highlands of Manicaland, Laurie said. Mindful of his role in representing all dispossessed farmers, Laurie maintains he has never approached Mugabe about regaining his own farm or obtaining compensation.

19. (U) Laurie is probably in his mid to late 70s. He lives with his wife in Harare and has at least one adult son who resides in Capetown, South Africa.

Comment

10. (C) Laurie appears to be one more in a string of emissaries encouraged by senior members of the GOZ to feel out USG "openness to discussion." Familiarly, he contends that the recognition that the economy is in a nosedive, combined with Mugabe's position of political strength, opens up an avenue for GOZ-U.S. re-engagement. What he and other advocates of rapprochement have failed to convey, however, is any sense that Mugabe or those around him are inclined to consider, much less implement, meaningful political or economic reforms. They have reached a watershed with their recognition that the country's economic predicament necessitates re-engagement with the international community. But, they have yet to go to the next level and accept that the cost of ending their isolation is a reversal of their self-destructive policies. Accordingly, we reiterate our comment in reftel: This is not the time to be lured into a process that will buy the GOZ time and stave off economic collapse and political ruin just a little bit longer.

DELL